

The Demographic Crisis in Russia

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Vladimir Putin, the President of the Russian Federation, faces a number of obstacles in attaining his stated goal of restoring the nation to a position of global prominence; one of the most significant obstacles to achieving these aspirations lies in the nation's demographics. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has experienced a prolonged period of population decline. This widely acknowledged demographic trend could, in the foreseeable future, overthrow all of President Putin's ambitions and spell disaster for Russia. While such an assertion admittedly lacks universal consensus, its plausibility becomes apparent upon further consideration. The following paper seeks to expound on the argument that sustained Russian population decline inevitably precipitates a formidable weakening of Russia. The argument shall proceed as follows. First, before discussing the major implications of Russian depopulation, a basic review of its causes is necessary. Once these causes are enumerated and examined, an analysis of the implications shall begin. The implications are divided into three categories: economic, social, and political. In regards to economics, depopulation will yield a diminution of the labor force, which then depreciates the nation's overall economic potential. Socially, population decline initiates a breakdown of the nuclear family, which then in turn triggers the deterioration or at least the remaking of society as a whole. Lastly, the political ramifications of Russian depopulation involve widespread civil unrest, fueled by extreme ethnic tensions between the shrinking Slavic population and the growing Muslim population. The culmination of all these factors bodes poorly for the future of Russia. Therefore, rather than witnessing Russia's restoration to all its former glory as President Putin hopes, the world will see a nation substantially weakened, since the extensive depopulation within Russia will, in all probability, fuel an economic, political, and social transformation of immense magnitude.

Before examining each of the underlying causes in greater depth, the statistics that illustrate Russia's demographic decline deserve some particular attention. In his book, *Implosion*, Ilan Berman explains Russia's demographic decline in terms of a formula known as the "total fertility rate" or TFR (Berman, *Implosion*, 14). In order to sustain a stable population, countries require an average TFR of 2.1 live births per woman (14). Berman then cites U.S. Census Bureau statistics, stating:

[I]n the years between 2000 and 2008, Russia's average annual fertility rate was 1.34, far below the 2.1 necessary to maintain a population at its current size. Today, the situation is a bit better. According to U.S. government estimates, Russia now ranks 178th in the world, with a TFR of 1.61. (15)

Despite this increase in Russia's total fertility rate, many experts remain far from optimistic. For instance, the projections of the United Nations Population Division (UNPD) indicate that, in the year of 2025, Russia's population will range from 136 million to 121 million; in 2030, the UNPD predicts that Russia's population will range only from 133 million to 115 million, and by 2050 – a little over 100 million (Eberstadt). The Russian Federation's population numbered about 143 million in 2013 (Berman, "Russia, Poised for Failure"). Thus, the UNPD's estimates appear quite daunting, revealing a decrease of 10 million people in seventeen years as the best-case scenario. These dismal forecasts most likely stem from the observed intransience of the underlying causes of Russia's depopulation. Government officials, economists, and political scientists have all named a wide range of reasons explaining Russia's declining population; the most commonly articulated explanations include tremendously high mortality rates, a culture of abortion, an AIDS epidemic, and mass emigration. The abysmal and erratic mortality rates within Russia enjoy long-standing historical precedence. Russia's turbulent past, including World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution, World War II, Joseph Stalin's purges, and the collapse of the Soviet Union, unsurprisingly yielded highly volatile mortality levels. Exploring Russia's

past and present life expectancy estimates provides great insight into the future of the country, since the “single clearest and most comprehensible summary of a population’s mortality prospects is its estimated expectation of life at birth” (Eberstadt). After the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia’s life expectancy estimates have remained noticeably low. Ilan Berman explains further, stating:

In 2004, Russia ranked 122nd in the world in life expectancy, placing it in the bottom third of all nations and far out-side the norm for industrialized ones. By 2011, that number had plunged some twenty-two places, to 144th. The average life expectancy for Russian citizens is now seventy years, putting them behind the citizens of Peru and Tonga...and only slightly ahead of those in countries such as Tuvalu, Mongolia, and North Korea. (Berman, *Implosion*, 17)

These high mortality rates arise from persistent problems within Russia, such as rampant alcoholism and violence. Alcoholism is pervasive throughout Russia, and Russian scientists claim that twenty percent of the male deaths in modern Russia are alcohol-related (Berman, *Implosion*, 18). Similarly, violence remains highly problematic, considering that “Russia’s patterns of death from injury and violence (by whatever provenance) are so extreme and brutal that they invite comparison only with the most tormented spots on the face of the planet today” (Eberstadt). The common culture of abortion within Russia is another important cause of the current depopulation. In the times of the Soviet Union, abortion was viewed as the best form of birth control; consequently, in 1965 the Health Ministry recorded 5.5 million abortions and only 2 million live births (Blyth). The statistics from 1997 are equally as dismal, for they indicate that about seventy percent of Russian pregnancies ended in abortion (DaVanzo and Grammich, 27). An article published by Reuters seeks to assure readers that “wider availability of contraception and a resurgence of religion have reduced the numbers of abortions overall, but [the author admits that] termination remains the top method of birth control in Russia” (Reuters). To compound the problems stemming from alcoholism, violence, and abortion, the

Russian HIV/AIDS epidemic only exacerbates demographic and social woes. “In 2000, the number of HIV carriers and AIDS patients is estimated to have increased fourfold,” and this rapid spread of the disease is linked to the increasing intravenous drug use within Russia (DaVanzo and Grammich, 56-57). The last commonly cited major cause of Russia’s dire depopulation problem is the fact that Russians have been fleeing their homeland. “More than two million people are believed to have left Russia during the thirteen years that President Vladimir Putin has been in power...[and m]any of those who stay are thinking of leaving” (Berman, *Implosion*, 23). The culmination of all of these factors casts a shadow over Russia’s future.

One of the most famous theories regarding both population and economics is the notion that population growth inevitably creates shortages, poverty, high unemployment, and all sorts of other economic ills. Thomas Malthus was the first to propagate this disheartening notion, and the Malthusian fallacy manages to persist in the minds of many journalists, economists, and political scientists today (Jacoby). Nevertheless, Malthus’ theory proves false, for, as Jeff Jacoby argues in his article “The Coming Population Bust,” this discouraging notion fails to account for the potential inherent in each human being. Jacoby cogently states:

Like other prejudices, the belief that more humanity means more misery resists compelling evidence to the contrary. In the past two centuries, the number of people living on earth has nearly septupled, climbing from 980 million to 6.5 billion. And yet human beings today are on the whole healthier, wealthier, longer-lived, better-fed, and better-educated than ever before... True, fewer human beings would mean fewer mouths to feed. It would also mean fewer entrepreneurs, fewer pioneers, fewer problem-solvers. Which is why it is not an increase but the coming decrease in human population that should engender foreboding. (Jacoby)

Thus, according to Jacoby’s logic, Russia’s looming demographic crisis strongly suggests dire consequences for Russia’s economic prognostics. A shrinking labor force is likely to inflict longstanding disadvantages on Russian economic potential, especially considering that Russia’s

youth will begin to account for less and less of the total population. RIA Novosti reports that this trend is already coming to fruition. The Federal State Statistics Service maintains that the age group ranging from 15 to 29 made up only twenty-two percent of the total population in 2012, measuring 31.6 million people; in 2011 this age group accounted for twenty-three percent of the population with 32.4 million people, and in 2009 it equaled twenty-four percent totaling 33.7 million (Pettersen). This observation has many officials worried. “If this trend continues the number of young people in the age group of 15-29 could go down to 25 million in only ten years time, says Sergey Belokonev of the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs” (Pettersen). Even President Putin has addressed the issue, though many of his critics complain the attention paid is both ephemeral and insignificant. Still, the government has not been silent on the matter, and one article even claims that the Russian government “has worked hard to foster a baby boom, honouring families at pomp-filled Kremlin events, offering subsidies to parents with more than one child and even raffling off cars to women who give birth on the national holiday” (Reuters). Nonetheless, these efforts have done little in mitigating the impact of depopulation within the country, and many economists foresee significant economic problems in Russia’s near future. For example, in his book, *Petrostate*, Marshall Goldman contends that:

Russia’s population shrinkage makes it difficult to find enough young men to staff not only the army but also the industrial and agricultural workforce. [Furthermore,...a declining birth rate means that it will be harder and harder to support the increasing percentage of the population who have reached retirement age. (Goldman, 198).

Evidently, many economists regard youth as the safeguard for the future. Thus, when a country’s youthful population is steadily dwindling, the country’s prospective security dwindles alongside its people. In his article, “Drunken Nation: Russia’s Depopulation Bomb,” Nicholas Eberstadt paints an even bleaker picture for Russia’s future:

Putin's Kremlin made a fateful bet that natural resources – oil, gas, and other extractive saleable commodities – would be the springboard for the restoration of Moscow's influence as a great power on the world stage. In this gamble, Russian authorities have mainly ignored the nation's human resource crisis. During the boom years – Russia's per capita income roughly doubled between 1998 and 2007 – the country's death rate barely budged. Very much worse may lie ahead. (Eberstadt)

In short, the likelihood that Russia will manage to outrun its demographic realities appear highly improbable. Human capital remains the most vital driver in an economy, and Russia will feel the constraints of intractable population decline before long.

The nuclear family, which typically comprises of a father, a mother, and a number of children born within wedlock, is the most basic unit of society. Historically, nuclear families have served as the societal building blocks that hold communities, states, and nations together. Therefore, the disintegration of this foundational unit of society, which coincides with sustained depopulation, proves immensely problematic. Russia has already shown signs that the nuclear family is steadily deteriorating. In 1980, Russia's illegitimacy was relatively low, with less than one in nine newborns reportedly born out of wedlock; by 2005, however, reports indicated that Russia's illegitimacy ratio almost tripled, approaching thirty percent (Eberstadt). Additionally, marriage is increasingly less common and less stable (Eberstadt). Consequently, nuclear families are becoming more and more rare, and those that persist tend to beget a noticeably smaller number of children. These trends appear quite irreversible, as Eberstadt articulates below:

[T]his much is clear: to date, no European society that has embarked upon the same demographic transition as Russia's – declining marriage with rising divorce, the spread of cohabitation as alternative to marriage; delayed age at marriage and sub-replacement fertility regimens – has reverted to more 'traditional' family patterns and higher levels of completed family size. There is no reason to think that in Russia it will be any different. (Eberstadt)

If Eberstadt is correct, then Russia must contend with the constraints imposed by the changes within the family structure. In a book which documents the proceedings of a seminar held by

the Council of Europe on the Implications of a Stationary or Declining Population, Max Wingen addresses how a declining population impacts the basic structure of the family, which then in turn reorganizes the entire structure of society. Wingen argues that long-term depopulation “inevitably leads to lasting structural changes in the composition of the parent-child community which is one of the important elements of family socialization” (Council of Europe, 100-101). This consideration leads Wingen to suggest that the tendency towards smaller families may “modify the capacities of the family in such a way as to render it largely powerless to fulfill its elementary social, education and cultural functions” (101). Furthermore, “[i]t is often noted...that very small (one-child) families tend to form a milieu that is not conducive to socialization; the same is true of two-child families where the children are widely spaced, so that in practice two ‘only-child situations’ occur” (Council of Europe, 101). These suppositions do not bode well for Russia, since a large number of Russian families, whether traditional or otherwise, are opting to have only one or two children. Since this is the case, many families will form the aforementioned milieu that hinders the parents’ ability to socialize their children. Socialization is the main mechanism through which families shape society. Thus, if families are rendered unable to perform this function, then some other body must fill this void. As soon as some other social organ assumes this role, the structure of society is fundamentally altered. This alteration could occur in the following manner. Considering that the family is the smallest, most basic unit of society, it is logical to infer that whichever social organ undertakes the task of socializing the nation’s youth will unavoidably be larger and more complex than its predecessor. Once power or responsibility transfers to a more complex body, the significance of the family unit will most likely decrease even more. In sum, generations of children will turn to the larger and more complex social organ in order to receive elementary social, educational,

and cultural instruction, and the family's societal importance will diminish and perhaps become a merely nominal unit of society. While these prognostications may never come to pass, the fact remains that Russia's demographic crisis will have serious social implications, and the future of Russia's stability will depend entirely on the reconstruction of the basic structures of Russian society.

The political implications of the prospective demographic changes within Russia similarly indicate foreseeable complications to President Putin's global ambitions for the nation. In addition to the other consequences attending Russian depopulation, which are hardly trivial, the rising Muslim population within Russia coinciding with the shrinking Slavic population sets the stage for extensive civil unrest. The growth of Islam in Russia is indisputable, and some analysts warn of the immensity of this trend, arguing:

The implications of Islam's ascendance in Russia are hard to overstate. "Russia is going through a religious transformation that will be of greater consequence for the international community than the collapse of the Soviet Union," Paul Globe, a leading expert on Russia's Muslims, has said. Russia's religious transformation is still unfolding. At their current rate of growth, Muslims will make up one-fifth of Russia's population by 2020. And by the middle of this century, officials in Moscow predict that the Russian Federation might become majority Muslim. (Berman, *Implosion*, 30)

Such a profound transformation appears exceedingly probable. The Muslim community continues to flourish, while the Slavic majority fails to meet the total fertility rate of 2.1 necessary for replenishment. Furthermore, "[e]xperts say only migration [particularly, large surges of immigration] can help plug the demographic black hole, but that is a solution with potential explosive side effects given the country's ethnic tensions" (Reuters). Russia has had a long history of ethnic tensions stemming from religious differences, which is only exacerbated by radical Islamic terrorism. These tensions, which are especially noticeable in the North Caucasus, have received particular attention in the media due to the Chechen involvement in the

Boston Bombing terrorist attack and the security fears that accompanied the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi. Nevertheless, whether the media notices or not, the tensions are real, and they will have momentous repercussions as the demographic shift takes place. Today, the unrest is spreading from the North Caucasus to Russia's heartland, and ethnic violence is on the rise (Berman, "Russia, Poised for Failure"). Perhaps unsurprisingly, "the rise in ethnic violence in Russia has been propelled by a surge in extreme right-wing nationalism" (Berman, *Implosion*, 34). Even so, Russian nationalism is not limited to the Far Right, as Berman illustrates below:

More and more, Russians from across the political spectrum are identifying with and organizing around a nationalism that is increasingly tinged with racism. "The level of xenophobia today is rising among various social groups," Russia's Civic Chamber, an official civil society oversight body created by Vladimir Putin...noted in its 2012 annual report. "An especially sharp rise can be observed among the citizens of major cities and among those people with high levels of education. Their phobias relate first and foremost to migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia, and are motivated by 'insurmountable' cultural differences." The result has been the creation of what one specialist has called "a fashion for xenophobia" throughout the country. (Berman, *Implosion*, 35)

These observations dishearten many who wish to see Russia embrace a more tolerant culture. However, these prejudices among the Russian people are not entirely unreasonable. Brutal terrorist attacks occur with horrifying frequency. For instance, Russia's most violent terrorist organization, the Caucasus Emirate, carried out 511 terrorist attacks in 2009 alone, and by the end of 2010, the number had jumped to 583 (Berman, *Implosion*, 45). To complicate matters further, the local attitudes in Russia's Muslim communities demonstrate a hardening of radical religious beliefs. Berman describes these beliefs, saying:

A poll conducted in early 2011 by the regional journal *Nations of Dagestan* found that 30 percent of Dagestani youth, including members of Dagestan's universities and police schools, said they would choose to live under a Muslim-run religious regime. More than a third of those polled indicated they would not turn in a friend or family member responsible for terrorism to authorities. These findings mirror those of human rights groups and NGOs active in the Caucasus, which have documented an upsurge in support for Islamic extremism and adherence to radical religious ideas there. (45-46)

The above results show that the Russian people have a justifiable reason to grow wary of these communities, in which a considerable number of people display more loyalty to Islam than to Russia. Therefore, Russia's demographic transformation threatens its future political stability.

In conclusion, the looming demographic crisis in Russia is leading the nation down an unsettling and unfamiliar path. While the future is by no means certain and predictions are wholly speculative, the declining population within Russia undoubtedly raises substantial economic, social, and political concerns. In summation, depopulation has the potential to decimate the labor force, destroy the structure of the nuclear family, and generate civil unrest. The culmination of all these factors casts a shadow of uncertainty over the future of Russia. Nevertheless, the Russian government, led by President Putin, appears relatively unmoved by these prognostications, as Eberstadt describes, stating:

Moscow's leadership is advancing into this uncertain terrain not only with insouciance but with highly ambitious goals. In late 2007, for example, the Kremlin outlined the objective of achieving and maintaining an average annual pace of economic growth in the decades ahead on the order of nearly 7 percent a year... But history offers no examples of a society that has demonstrated sustained material advance in the face of long-term population decline. It seems highly unlikely that such an ambitious agenda can be achieved in the face of Russia's current demographic crisis. Sooner or later, Russian leadership will have to acknowledge that these daunting long-term developments are shrinking their country's social and political potential. (Eberstadt)

Thus, while Russia's demise is far from inevitable, these daunting long-term developments are hard to ignore. Furthermore, the longevity of the major causes of Russia's declining population, namely high mortality, alcoholism, violence, abortion, an AIDS epidemic, and mass emigration, solidify the presumption that Russia will not attain its former glory. However, the world will see a fundamentally transformed Russia, since the extensive population decline will essentially remake the nation, though probably not in accordance with President Putin's ambitions.

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